

Eight Stages of Dissolution at the Time of Death

Buddhist tantric texts describe the process of death as a gradual dissolution of both the physical elements and mental states. This dissolution unfolds in eight distinct stages, culminating in the experience of the clear light mind—the most subtle level of consciousness. These stages correspond to the disintegration of the elements (earth, water, fire, and air), the internal experiences that arise, and progressively subtler states of mind.

Here's a detailed description of the eight stages of dissolution at death, leading to the clear light mind:

1.

Earth Element Dissolves into Water

Physical signs: The body feels heavy, and the person loses strength and coordination. Vision begins to blur, and the eyes feel dry.

Mental experience: The mental consciousness becomes unclear and confused. There is a sense of losing stability and grounding.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a mirage-like vision, as if seeing heat waves in the air.

2.

Water Element Dissolves into Fire

Physical signs: Fluids in the body dry up, including saliva and bodily secretions. The person experiences a dryness in the mouth and throat, and hearing becomes faint or muffled.

Mental experience: The emotions may become unstable. There is a sense of mental disorientation.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a vision like smoke rising in the air.

3.

Fire Element Dissolves into Air

Physical signs: Body heat diminishes, especially in the hands and feet. The digestive system stops functioning. Smell fades, and the warmth of the body begins to recede.

Mental experience: Memory and thinking abilities weaken, and it becomes difficult to focus or maintain clarity.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness sees sparks or fireflies, like embers in the night sky.

4.

Air Element Dissolves into Consciousness

Physical signs: Breathing becomes shallow and irregular. The person can no longer move, and the sense of touch fades away.

Mental experience: The mental consciousness loses its ability to hold onto ordinary thoughts. The person may feel restless or fearful.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a vision of a dim, flickering light, like a candle about to go out.

5.

Consciousness Dissolves into White Appearance

Physical signs: Outer and inner breathing cease. The senses and bodily functions stop working completely.

Mental experience: All ordinary mental activity ceases., and the person's mental consciousness experiences a clear, white light. This is often described as a white sky or moonlit night. This stage is the first experience of the subtler mind.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a vision of clear, white light.

6.

Red Increase

Mental experience: The mind becomes even subtler, and the person experiences a clear, red or orange light. This is associated with a deep sense of peace and warmth, often described as a twilight sky or sunrise.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a vision of red light filling the sky.

7.

Black Near-Attainment

Mental experience: The mind continues to dissolve, and the person experiences a deep, black void. Consciousness becomes extremely subtle, and awareness may seem to fade completely. There is a sense of non-perception, as if falling into unconsciousness.

Inner sign: The mental consciousness perceives a vision of blackness, like a dark night sky without stars.

8. Clear Light Mind

Mental experience: The mind reaches its most subtle and pure state, known as the

Clear light mind: This is an awareness free from conceptuality, transcending ordinary perception, representing our most fundamental consciousness. According to the Buddhist tantric tradition, recognizing, abiding in, and realizing emptiness with this mind is considered essential for attaining the enlightened state of a buddha.

Reverse Process

In the reverse process of the eight dissolutions after death, mental visions emerge in a sequence that mirrors the dissolutions, moving from the most subtle state of consciousness, the clear light mind, back to grosser levels of perception. These stages (starting with the mind of black near-attainment) occur during the bardo (intermediate state) that precedes an individual's rebirth.